



QSA Notes

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Peacebuilding in Cambodia: Reducing inter-ethnic conflict and building connections

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It's just over 12 months since the start of this project, designed to reduce conflict and strengthen collaboration in ethnically diverse Cambodian communities, but already, it is achieving encouraging results.

The project aims to build mutual understanding and exchange to reduce conflict and enhance cooperation among ethnic Khmer Vietnamese communities in Kampong Chhnang province, central Cambodia, enhancing community relations and providing learning opportunities for children and youth to improve their prospects.



A Vietnamese community relocated from houseboats to nearby land subject to flooding, where they had to rent land and build makeshift homes.

QSA successfully applied for funding along with its implementing partner, Khmer Community Development (KCD), from the Jan de Voogd Peace Fund. Jan, a Quaker Peace activist, died in 2021, leaving his estate to be spent on projects that foster peace and social justice.

Background to the problem - the situation of ethnic Vietnamese

Most of the Cambodian population is ethnic Khmer. Still, up to 10 per cent are ethnic Vietnamese who are vulnerable and disadvantaged, denied citizenship and the right to own land, and without access to services like education and healthcare. They are considered migrants, despite living in the country for many generations. This community experiences significant discrimination and deep-seated historical resentment of the Vietnamese. Despite friendly ties with the Vietnamese Government, politicians fuel anti-Vietnamese sentiments during election campaigns, and political activists, academics and civil society representatives contribute by exacerbating prejudices against the Vietnamese.

Ethnic Vietnamese are concentrated on lakes and waterways where they fish and live on the water or nearby. In the poor Kampong Chhnang fisher communities, anti-Vietnamese attitudes are a latent issue that quickly surfaces if adverse circumstances arise. Friendly but distant relations exist between neighbours, but language barriers, remote living locations and the fear of hidden structures benefitting the ethnic Vietnamese persist. Khmer people have little awareness or empathy regarding the existential concerns of ethnic Vietnamese, and ethnic Vietnamese keep a low profile to avoid being targeted, often relocating their houseboats rather than addressing the issues they confront. This results in fragmented communities where escalation is possible anytime, often in derogatory language. Neither Khmer nor Vietnamese openly speak about this latent conflict.

Elements of the project

It is politically difficult to talk about peacebuilding in Cambodia concerning ethnic Vietnamese, so this project focuses on education, particularly language skills, as the vehicle to build collaboration and reduce conflict. There are two elements:

Getting communities together There is widespread resentment and little or no interaction between ethnic communities, even those living in the same village. Underlying conflicts and prejudices must be addressed to achieve inclusive community development and improve social cohesion and advocacy. This project includes events and activities to promote understanding and bring the communities together.

Children and parents/guardians receive awareness training in child rights and non-discrimination. In addition, the different ethnic groups are involved in workshops designed to encourage them to collaborate to address their community's needs. In addition to formal workshops, KCD is organising activities and events so the communities can meet, such as celebrating International Children's Day in the Vietnamese community.



Child rights training for Children's Council members at Samroung School



Child rights training for Khmer parents

A shared language

KCD has demonstrated how language skills training can promote inter-ethnic peace in other locations. A shared language is a critical prerequisite for promoting understanding between these diverse ethnic communities and enhancing the life opportunities for ethnic Vietnamese children excluded from school and employment. This project provides ethnic Vietnamese children with the language skills they need to overcome many of their current disadvantages and provides opportunities for children from different ethnic groups to work and play together.

Two hundred ethnic Vietnamese children from four schools joined Khmer language and life skills classes and activities designed to increase attendance, reduce dropout rates and improve life opportunities. New Peace Clubs and Children's Councils enable children and young people from ethnic communities to learn and explore social and life skills together. In a series of workshops, 100 Khmer and Vietnamese children and young people will collectively discuss visions for their communities.

KCD is a long-standing QSA partner with over 15 years of experience in peacebuilding. It has robust project design and execution capabilities and close connections with the communities in which it works. As a result, communities are involved in all aspects of planning and implementation to achieve their goals. In addition, KCD staff have training and experience in peacebuilding, including Vietnamese speakers, teachers and facilitators.

The project so far

Initially, the project focused on identifying key representatives in each of the communities, activities to support schools, starting Khmer language classes, and preparing Khmer language resources for ethnic Vietnamese. Training in child rights was also provided to 400 children and adults in both communities.



A child reads on the roof of her flooded home, October 2022

With the start of Khmer language classes, most Vietnamese children are learning Khmer for the first time. In addition, more children attend school after the child rights training, and school directors say some new parents have enrolled children. As a result, they report children are building more confidence and are now thinking about their dreams.

The project area suffered severe flooding in October 2022, with Vietnamese families the worst affected. Many lost their houses. However, they received no support from local authorities. As a result, project activities were postponed to avoid risks to children. Since then, some adults had difficulties participating due to their focus on rebuilding houses and businesses following the floods and the ongoing impact of COVID-19.

Despite KCD's long experience working with Vietnamese, some aspects of the project have taken longer than expected. For example, they've needed longer to build relations with some ethnic Vietnamese communities and to secure approvals from local authorities.

A two-year project is very short when working with different ethnic communities, but KCD is confident of achieving good results. They are already working to secure another donor to help support ongoing work in these communities.